

MANCHESTER NEW COLLEGE, LONDON.

Address

TO

THE STUDENTS,

DELIVERED AT THE CLOSE OF THE SESSION, 1883-4,

BY

CHARLES BEARD, B.A.,

VISITOR.

"The College adheres to its original principle of freely imparting Theological knowledge without insisting on the adoption of particular Theological doctrines."

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JOHNSON & RAWSON, PRINTERS, 89, MARKET STREET.

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ADDRESS.

GENTLEMEN,

Your year's work is at an end, and you are now expecting from me those words of mingled criticism and advice and encouragement which it is the function of your Visitor to utter. To-day, however, I shall not attempt to play the critic's part. To do so with effect, I must have had a larger experience of your work, and be able to compare its results from year to year. I have, nevertheless, heard enough to assure me that you have honestly given your minds to the studies of the place, that your industry has not been without its due fruit of success, and that you have a right to look forward to a period of rest and recreation. What I shall try to do is to place before you certain general aspects of your task and calling; and in the case of those who are passing out of the state of pupilage into that of active work and self-direction, to offer friendly advice, which, whatever its value, is the outcome of my own experience.

In the first place, let us make it quite clear why you are here, and on what terms I address you. I take it as true, once for all, that you are not so much preparing for a profession as obeying a vocation. Unfortunately, I know, the professional element cannot be wholly eliminated from the

ministerial life ; it is necessary that you should undergo a special training, and when that is over you will find yourselves separated from your fellow-citizens by forms and etiquettes, and, in some respect, by feelings and prejudices too, which I honestly wish did not exist. But these things touch, or ought to touch, only the outer shell of your life. You do not enter the ministry to earn a livelihood, or to win a respectable and influential position in society, or to be able to give yourselves to literature. Devotion to abstract truth in any form, even the theological, is not your ruling motive ; nor the propagation of any set of opinions, nor the service of a particular church. You are here, if I read your hearts rightly, because you have been touched by the awe of God, and feel that His service is the highest and happiest employment of human powers ; because you burn with a genuine enthusiasm for the Kingdom of Heaven, and are willing to spend yourselves and to be spent, if only you can hasten its coming ; because you believe that religion is the secret of the individual, and the strength of the common life. I do not ask you whether in some moment of vivid and exalted consciousness you have heard a Voice within, so sweet and so majestic that it were impossible not to listen and obey ; the Spirit does not work in all souls in the same way, and its guidance is often inaudible, though not unfelt. But if what I have said does not rightly represent your highest aspiration, your deliberate intention, I beseech you to pause ere it is too late. The yoke of God's service is not to be assumed on lower terms than these. Something of the awe of divine intercourse must rest upon your souls, something of the fire of prophecy burn upon your lips, if your lives are not to be an unwilling drudgery, a long mistake.

But given the vocation, what then? You come here to submit yourselves to a training which is sometimes represented as being too long, too laborious, too little in accord with your future wants and work. But I do not imagine that those of you who are most in earnest with your vocation, and best understand its compass and its demands, seriously think so. We live in times at which the scope of education is being enlarged from day to day, at which human knowledge grows rapidly wider, and science makes upon thoughtful men claims almost as imperative as those of literature, and new standards of scholarship are set up, more difficult to reach than the old. Nor, of all men, can the minister of religion afford to admit that his intellectual sympathies are bounded, and that he is only partially in touch with the movements of modern thought. And what I would advise those who are still pursuing their studies in the College is, that they should submit themselves in docile good faith to the discipline imposed upon them, and endeavour to occupy, so far as their strength and abilities will permit, the whole area of instruction thrown open. I know the temptation to the eager student to confine himself to the kind of work which he likes best, and thinks that he can best do, nor am I without sympathy with another who burns to be at work in the Christian harvest field, and is inclined to believe that severe theological study is little better than so much surplusage and hindrance. But I can assure the first, out of my own regretful experience, that opportunities once slighted rarely recur; and both, that no preparation can be too thorough for the complete and permanent discharge of the duties which await them. And it is a mistake to suppose that theological learning and spiritual life are in any degree at variance; or that the best intellec-

tual training can clip the wings of aspiration, or sap the strength of dutifulness. No doubt there are theological prigs, religious Dry as dusts, men in whose words there is no life, in whose example no contagion. But it is not because they happen to be learned; it would be just as much so were they ignorant. It is because no fire from heaven has touched their hearts, or burns upon their lips.

Let me point out to you that you pursue your studies here under circumstances of singular advantage. You stand equally free to your work now and your work hereafter. You were not asked when you came here to pledge yourselves to any form of theological doctrine. What was demanded of you was that you should bring sufficient abilities, a fit preparatory training, and an open mind to the study of theology. In addition to this—rather, I would say, as a condition precedent of this—the College takes for granted your religious vocation, and does what it can to purify and strengthen it; but it imposes no convictions upon you; it only supplies you with the materials of conviction, and leaves you free to form your own. The results of thought, no less than the methods of thinking, are laid before you; but it would be an act of grave unfaithfulness to the sacredness of religious conviction were you to be biassed in what is the most important intellectual act of your lives. So, when you leave this place, the College does not designate you to the service of any particular church. It would be seriously disappointed were you to decline from ministerial service altogether, and hardly less so were you to perform it with perfunctory obedience, and only half a heart. But you are free to serve God, and Christ, and man, in whatever religious connection you will; and the one unfaithfulness of which you can be

guilty to your Alma Mater is to be untrue to her traditions of freedom, and piety, and dutifulness. And I speak confidently of traditions, for this principle of theological instruction is no new thing. It was handed down to us from the Presbyterian academies of the last century, which, in the seclusion of their modest usefulness, kept alight that true fire of theological education, which was all but extinct upon more conspicuous altars. It is in the strength of this principle that we have attained the level of religious conviction, on which, for the most part, we stand ; and we look to its future operation to place theology on the same intellectual footing as other sciences. It is a principle which, after having been in the keeping of our forefathers, and our own, for almost two hundred years, is slowly, but surely, growing into universal recognition, and I am convinced that you, who are the sons of those who adhered to it when it was a counsel of perfection, will not be unfaithful when men are beginning to acclaim and adopt it. At all events, come what will, Manchester New College cannot decline from it ; apart from it, there is no reason why she should exist ; it is the breath of her life.

To you, gentlemen, who are about to leave the College, to engage in the active work of the church, I dare not describe the ministerial life in very glowing colours. If I were to hear one of my brethren in the ministry picturing it as an uninterrupted series of intellectual and moral triumphs, of duties completely fulfilled, and occasions fully occupied, I should be compelled to think that he understood neither it nor himself. I could almost say that disappointment awaits you just in proportion as you rise to the true conception of your calling ; only now and then will it be given you to see Satan as lightning fall from heaven, and your habitual

cry must be "Who is sufficient for these things?" For the characteristic part of your work is neither definite dogmatic teaching, nor triumphant controversy, either of which is easy enough to those who have little knowledge and much self-confidence, but the feeding of souls, which is a difficult and an anxious thing. To infuse the awe and love of God into young hearts, and to direct them into the way of manly goodness; to help toiling, tempted, struggling men and women to keep up a good courage, knowing that beneath them are the Everlasting Arms; to offer to this perplexed spirit a clue out of the mazes of doubt, to lead that despondent soul into the clear sunlight of God's goodness; to discern for yourselves, and so to enable others to discern the gleams from the eternal home, which shine through these lower mists, and help to scatter them;—this is what you have to do. And before long you will acknowledge how little you are equal to your task, and how in its complexity and variety, it baffles your best endeavours. But, believe me, of all the work that the world offers, it is the best worth doing. It keeps you in the felt presence of God. It secures to you the august companionship of Christ. It opens to you the Communion of Saints. Its difficulties make you humble, its failures teach you self-distrust, its successes enforce the lesson—Not I, but the goodness of God. It is likely enough that you will not attract crowded congregations, or rivet upon yourselves your country's admiring gaze, or approve yourselves the heralds of a new religious reformation; but when some shepherd writes to you from Australia, to tell you how your words have come back to him in the bush, and been his safeguard against gross temptation, or some poor struggling sempstress confesses that, but for your faith in God and goodness, she must have sunk beneath the burthen of her

fate—you will want no more; you will thank God and be content.

Fix your minds, then, on this central object of your work, and let all else be subordinate to it. I know that I am setting before you a high ideal, proposing to you a difficult task. Trust me when I say, that of all sermons the hardest to preach is that which will do people good; which shall have some fire of aspiration in it, some strain of comfort, some sense of the awe of God. And, because such are so hard to preach, you will only rise to their height now and then. You will not find it difficult to shower the contents of your metaphysical note-books on a puzzled people; or to prove by positive arguments that any scheme of belief, save your own, is untenable by reasonable men. Nor, again, is anything easier than to destroy; to build a stately home of faith needs a delicate fancy of brain, and much loving skill, and lavish expenditure of wealth, and long years of labour; the result of which a little dynamite will suddenly reduce to a mass of shapeless ruins, which offer shelter to no worshipper, and are not pleasant for any eye to look upon. Souls cannot be fed by denials; not what we doubt, or disbelieve, but what we believe with all our heart and soul, gives us strength for action and endurance, inspires us for life, and enables us to meet death bravely. You have heard of the pelican, as a type of Christ; the bird, which according to mediæval naturalists, when all other nourishment fails, tears open its breast, and feeds its young with its own blood. It is an apt figure of the ministerial life. It is from your own heart that you must feed your people, out of your own experience that you must teach them, and in proportion to the depth, the richness, the variety of your religious life will they be fed and taught effectively.

It is in this sense that I would recommend to you the most absolute sincerity as the rule of your public instructions. From one point of view this recommendation might, perhaps, be considered superfluous ; it is a temptation to young men—and especially to young men situated as you are—to rejoice to find themselves on the topmost wave of what they suppose to be advancing thought, and to tell their people that they are there. On this side it might rather occur to me to advise a greater deliberateness, a reticence prompted not by concealment, but by modest self-distrust ; an inclination to wait for larger light, and a more matured power of judgment. New things are not always true ; and whatever faith has strengthened heroes and inspired saints must have a lesson to teach us, and some truth at the bottom of it. But what I mean by sincerity at this moment, is rather the resolve, that so far as possible you will preach that which at the moment really possesses your minds and hearts ; that you will endeavour to look the facts of the world and humanity fairly in the face, and speak no word that is not in accord with them ; that you will utter no shibboleths, conform to no orthodoxies, take upon your lips no sectarian cries, yield yourselves to no factitious enthusiasms. It is a great gift, this of sincere speech ; but it belongs to two classes of men,—those to whom God has given the piercing eye of genius, and those whom He has blessed with a yet better thing, a simple heart. And just in proportion as you can attain to it, you will find that, no matter how stammering your utterance, men will hang upon your lips, and the common people hear you gladly.

And I would have you recollect, in the next place, that after the training which you have here received, you are not to go forth to devote yourselves to the exclusive service of any single church or sect. You will have specific duties to

perform, a definite corner of the vineyard of Christ given you to cultivate, and to it you must give your whole powers. But rightly looked at, this self-consecration not only does not hinder, but absolutely demands for its own perfection that larger allegiance to truth, which always looks for fresh light to break out of every word of God, that broader loyalty to Christ which cannot be satisfied with less than the Communion of all Saints. It is in the most liberal spirit that the most confined duties are best done, and you cannot be nobly faithful to your village congregation unless you look upon it as part of the great family in heaven and on earth, named of the Lord Jesus. Accustom yourselves to the thought, therefore, that you cannot be more, and will not be less than Christians. Embrace every opportunity of friendly intercourse with men who differ from you in belief, whether their creed have more or fewer articles than yours; and see that you live in no closed sheepfold, but on God's open earth, and under His infinite sky. Try to study all varying manifestations of faith, and to penetrate to their central and inspiring idea, in books, in institutions, in converse with men;—it is possible that men who differ from you most have most to teach you. All forms of faith that have their fair issues in human life are but various embodiments of man's attempt to reach up to, and to comprehend Him who is beyond comprehension. Address yourselves to the secrets of Augustine and of Pascal, of Tauler and of Luther, of A'Kempis and of Barclay; and fresh from the fellowship of saints, you will go back with a richer heart, and a tenderer sympathy to the little flock that claims your supervision.

Last of all, I commend you to the fellowship of Christ. I am almost afraid to breathe the name, not that I do not joyfully carry it in my heart of hearts, but that I fear to

wake the echo of controversies, where no controversy should be, or to seem to take a side in disputes which I am persuaded are more concerned with words than things. At the same time I cannot make a mistake in desiring, with all the energy and passion of my soul, that you should carry with you into the work which you are beginning, the sweet reasonableness, the winning charm of Jesus; that you should learn from him, were it possible, the method by which he subtly wound himself into men's hearts, and penetrated to the sore place in their consciences; that a self devotion like his should bear you triumphantly through all hours of weakness; that in obedience such as his you may find the secret of strength; and above all, that living in his companionship you may often, hand in hand with him, take your way into the presence of the living God. That way is always open, I know, and the lowliest child of men may freely walk therein. But despise, I beseech you, no help, diligently use all means of grace; none of us so strong but needs to lean upon a stronger arm, none of us so clear of vision as not to be aided by a clearer insight. But why do I say more? You desire to be servants of Christ; take up, therefore, your cross and follow him, through weal or woe, even though it be to find your Calvary.

I cannot conclude this address without a word of tender and respectful reference to the venerable colleague, whom, in the fulness of years, God has just taken from us. Without flattering him, who would have gently put flattery aside were he living, I may well hold him up to you as an example of what the life may be to which you now aspire. First a student in Manchester New College, then Professor, Secretary, Chairman of Committee, Visitor,—there was no

duty in connection with this institution that was not laid upon him, and none that he did not perform with quiet efficiency. For fifty-six years he ministered to one congregation, preaching always, and with a voice in which deeper tones of earnestness were audible as he grew older, the gospel of righteousness, and peace, and kindliness; at the service of every good cause that asked his aid, and full of a tempered enthusiasm of humanity that never wavered or waned; rejoicing in work for the church which he served, and making the most of it, yet at the same time letting his sympathies range far afield, cultivating many friendships, and reaping a rich harvest of esteem. I cannot recollect the time at which I did not know him. I have been closely associated with him in many ways; above all, this room and this occasion bring him back to me with an especial vividness, and I could well wish that he stood where I stand now. And I truly think that few purer, kindlier spirits have ever breathed than that of William Gaskell, a man absolutely without enemies, and whose friends respected as much as they loved him. He has declared, times without number, what he owed to this College, and the principles which it exists to maintain, and he repaid the debt amply by years of faithful, of efficient, of various service. Let it be ours now, as we utter these words of respectful and affectionate farewell, to claim as our highest illustration lives such as his, useful, modest, pious, kindly, pure.



